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«France, where they really know
how to plan, design»
by Colin Vaughan
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OPINION

France, where they really know how to plan, design

Colin Vaughan



Later, a university was established in the valley to the south. The 25 communes in the river valleys became concerned when university expansion began to encroach on the Plateau, which is also the site of the leading European nuclear research centre.

Fearing haphazard development, the communes joined forces with the aim of protecting the ecologically sensitive site. The result was a planning competition, and a Grumbach-Greenberg collaboration.

While in Paris, I dropped by Grumbach's office to check progress. The plan, which skilfully blends the natural features of the site, forest, water, and wind, is in the earliest stages of re-

alization. Public meetings have been held. Zoning regulations are in place. University expansion will be confined to the edge of the Plateau and will be linked to sites set aside for private research facilities. The state wants the Plateau to become a major high-tech research centre. *Motorola will locate there.* A particle accelerator is planned. A compact public-private city centre is on the drawing boards along with plans for student and other housing. In France, planning really does mean "think ahead."

In that spirit, transit comes first on the Plateau.

At the start, the embryonic community will be served by an innovative bus system that will see the vehicles hooking up with a train as the line approaches a Paris transit hub. As density increases, the buses will be replaced by light rapid transit. What a novel idea! An organic transportation system that evolves with the settlement. Why didn't we think of that?

Grumbach says he believes the most influential Parisian planning tool of the latter half of the 20th century has been the Carte Orange, the local

equivalent of our Metropass. By law, employers must provide the monthly pass to employees. Transit lines become the sinews of the city, not just an afterthought.

Aside from planning, Grumbach is no slouch as an architect. He has just won another competition for the design of a spectacular new bridge over the River Thames in London. And, on the day we met, we attended an official preview of a subway station he has designed on a new eight-kilometre transit service to be known as the Meteor Line.

A new subway in Paris? Enough already in this transit-rich city. But, there's a reason. The line serves an extensive redevelopment of a stretch of the Left Bank.

Like Toronto, Paris has extensive railway yards downtown. Eighteen hectares of tracks are now being redeveloped to the west of the old Austerlitz station, with a thick concrete deck over the rail line and the new transit line below. A controversial new national library in four bland, glass towers has been located there. On the surface a new boulevard, the Avenue de

France, will parallel the river.

Grumbach's contribution has been the magnificent design of the subway station under the library. The stop will be known as Bibliothèque.

The French are renowned for their love of complex engineering solutions, and Bibliothèque is no exception. The station is, more or less, a geometrically intricate, reinforced concrete version of the vaulted crypts under French cathedrals, fanning out into an upper level linked to a rail stop above.

All of which put me in mind of the time when we had real architects design the stations on our Spadina line. Too heady for Toronto, as it turned out. That brief flirtation with real design was soon crushed and we're now back to our infamous Endless Underground Public Toilet architectural style.

Oh, to be in Paris, now that spring is here. And where design is always in season.

Colin Vaughan, who reports on politics and urban affairs for CITY-TV, has been vacationing in France.

PARIS — Although Toronto and Paris are worlds apart when it comes to urban planning, at least one Toronto planner has left his mark on the French capital.

Ken Greenberg is a partner of the Toronto planning firm Urban Strategies. In 1993, Greenberg and his firm joined with famed Paris architect and planner Antoine Grumbach to win a competition for the planning of a new community on the outskirts of Paris.

Greenberg befriended Grumbach in the '60s when the French architect was teaching at the University of Toronto. They vowed that one day they would work together on a project. After a brief design fling in Amsterdam, the project turned out to be a new plan for the Plateau de Saclay, 20 kilometres southwest of Paris.

At the time, the Plateau was something of an urban anachronism, an elevated agricultural tract between two heavily settled river valleys.

The land has an interesting history. When Louis XIV built the nearby Palace of Versailles, a system of canals fed water from the Plateau to that extravagant royal folly.